

Panhandle Health District

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Prepared for the Worst

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It's nice to know when the power shuts off in a paralyzing storm that a flashlight with fresh batteries is hanging by the back door of your home and will light the way to the shelves of stored food and bottled water in the pantry or basement.

Not that prepared for an emergency? You're not alone or even rare. Nearly 70 percent of Americans surveyed last fall by Columbia University's National Center for Disaster Preparedness admitted they have no supplies stored at home to help them survive in a disaster.

"Individuals and families are extremely ill-prepared," says Doug Welch, program manager of the Panhandle Health District's (PHD) Public Health Preparedness department. "Even disasters like 9-11 and Katrina didn't convince people of the need for emergency supplies in their homes."

It's the goal of Welch and PHD to succeed where Katrina and 9-11 failed—in preparing people for disaster. In 1995, Former President Bill Clinton provided a podium for PHD to broadcast that lesson when he declared the first full week of April National Public Health Week.

Each year, the American Public Health Association chooses an idea to emphasize during Public Health Week. This year, the week is dedicated to helping the public become better prepared for a public health emergency.

"It's just good sense to be prepared for anything that might happen," Welch says. "It could be pandemic flu, but it also could be an ice storm."

Welch and PHD epidemiologist Jeff Lee make a good case for emergency preparation in their public presentations about pandemic flu. Predictions of a coming pandemic have circulated for years, spotlighting a concept that's been dormant for nearly 40 years. Welch and Lee explain in their flu forums that influenza pandemics—global outbreaks of new strains of the influenza virus--have occurred about three times a century for at least the last 500 years, and probably longer.

The last pandemic was in 1968 and was minor compared to the great pandemic of 1918. The 1918 pandemic killed an estimated 675,000 people in the United States and 50 million worldwide.

Avian flu is most responsible for the latest focus on pandemics. Birds are the carriers and the major victims of the avian flu virus at this point. They spread it to each other, but they've also transmitted it to people in close contact with them. Avian flu in people has a high fatality rate, but, so far, it doesn't seem to spread from person to person.

A mutation of the virus could change that and start a pandemic, the medical world has warned. People would have no immunity to a new strain of the virus and no vaccine would exist because no one knows what form the virus will take. Developing a vaccine will take six to eight months and then supplies will be limited.

Given bird flu's progress through Asia, Africa, and Europe such a scenario is not far fetched. And that's one reason Welch is promoting preparedness everywhere he goes.

"You can go to any store right now and buy all the food and supplies you want," he says. "That may not be the case during a pandemic or other emergency."

Opinions vary on how prepared people need to be in their homes. During Ice Storm in 1996, some North Idaho homes were without power for weeks. Past pandemics have hit in six- to eight-week waves. When a dangerous and contagious virus is present, people may need to stay home to protect themselves or to stop the spread of the virus they're carrying, Welch says.

“Why not be prepared to hole up in your house for six weeks, if that’s how long pan flu will last?” he says.

Storing enough emergency supplies to last six weeks is ideal, but history has shown that few people think that far ahead. With that in mind, Welch encourages people to start with a three-day emergency supply that includes non-perishable food—peanut butter, canned soup, canned meat—one gallon of water per day per person in the home and prescription and over-the-counter medications.

“Put it in a bag and put it where it’s accessible, so if the house is burning you can grab it,” he says. “I have my bag hanging next to the door.”

Three days is the minimum amount of supplies every home should have. Enough supplies for 10 days to two weeks are preferable. In addition to food and water, Welch suggests cooking fuel, a first aid kit, pet food and baby supplies. He recommends people identify alternative sources of cooking—barbecues, camp stoves—for the times power is out and reminds them to protect themselves against carbon monoxide exposure by cooking outdoors.

The American Red Cross provides a Disaster Preparedness Calendar that divides an ideal home emergency supply into portions to add weekly over 24 weeks. Besides food, water and flashlights, the Red Cross calendar includes duct tape, tools, toilet paper, pain relievers, sewing needles, hand soap, laxatives and a pet first aid kit. It suggests a change of clothing and a pair of shoes, extra batteries, safety goggles, dust masks and plastic containers with lids.

Medications should include ibuprofen and anti-diarrheals as well as prescribed insulin, blood pressure regulators or other vital drugs. People should ask their doctors for guidance on the medications they store. Welch warns that prescription medications are difficult to stockpile. Even if doctors will write a prescription in advance, insurance companies may not cover the cost for more than is needed in the short term.

“Talk to your doctor,” Welch recommends. “Contact your congressman.”

Emergency preparations are important for businesses, too, says Doug Fredericks, Panhandle Health District emergency preparedness planner. Fredericks is helping create a plan that will enable the health district to continue operating in an emergency that may close or destroy its building, knock out critical infrastructure such as phones or water or disable a significant portion of the workforce.

Businesses need to prioritize what they have to do to continue providing their product or service and put everything else on hold.

“Shift limited resources,” Fredericks says. “Throw your resources at your priorities.”

Businesses should consider how they’ll operate without power or with half their workers home sick and create a plan to carry them through those times.